

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING AFTER WAR

Narratives of truth, justice and reconciliation in a Bosnian town

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ABSTRACT

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This PhD dissertation sets out to deepen our understanding of how people make everyday strategies for living together after mass atrocities, and what role transitional justice may play for these strategies. The aim is to investigate the meanings of the contested concepts of truth, justice and reconciliation in a postconflict setting. The study critically scrutinizes central claims of the transitional justice and reconciliation paradigm and shows that measures for transitional justice cannot just be inserted into a passively receiving local context, but are always enfolded into ongoing local power struggles.

The thesis is based on a qualitative case study consisting of 53 open interviews as well as participatory observation in the small town of Foča in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The analysis explores local narratives of truth, justice and reconciliation, and their encounter with the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The findings show that the informants in Foča employed a multitude of strategies for living with the other in a deeply ethno-political setting. In this complex and discordant local world, the ICTY was used in different ways and produced processes that often differed from the intended outcome.

The theoretical and methodological design of the study along the lines of a narrative enquiry accesses central issues of identity and power. The struggle between acknowledgement and knowledge, individual justice and narratives of collective innocence, silences and remembrance practices, are some of the tensions explored. The insights indicate that reconciliation should theoretically be understood as an ongoing, messy and contradictory process. The study suggests that, to the extent that measures for transitional justice can take part in the construction of a social arena where exchange of plural meanings is possible, they may play a positive part in the building of sustainable peace.

Keywords: transitional justice, reconciliation, ICTY, Bosnia and Herzegovina, narrative theory, memory, identity